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ABSTRACT

This paper presents an explanation of practitioners' reactions to sex equitable sex education. Several constraints can prohibit practitioners from engaging in sex equitable sex education: (1) lack of community support; (2) lack of expertise in human sexuality education; (3) vagueness of school committee views; and (4) lack of answers to logistical questions. Strategies for attracting attention to these constraints are provided. One researcher's experience as an advocate of sex equitable menstrual education is described. Appended are 17 references. (SI)

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Sex Education and Sex Stereotypes: Theory and Practice

Margaret L. Stubbs

Recent reports (e.g., Hayes, 1987) indicate strong public support for sex education in the schools as well as an increase over the past fifteen years in the number of sex education programs offered. In at least one study, three-quarters of the adolescents surveyed reported having had some sex education before leaving school (Zelnick & Kim, 1982).

While these trends are encouraging, they should not be taken as evidence that sex education is widespread and/or comprehensive in scope. It has been estimated, for instance, that most schools offer short programs of 10 hours or less (Hayes, 1987), that less than 10 percent of all students take comprehensive sex education courses, i.e., courses of more than 40 hours or courses designed as components within a K - 12 developmental health or sex education program (Kirby, 1984; Leo, 1986), and that few schools include sex education in the early grades (Kirby, 1984).

Little is currently known about what really happens in sex education classes. What can be said is that content varies from locale to locale (Kirby, 1984). School systems are idiosyncratic in designing and implementing sex education programs, in part, because program planners must address local sensitivity as they work. In spite of a community's general endorsement of sex education as an important topic, conflicts do arise at the local level over the inclusion of specific topics (Hottois & Milner, 1975). Taking into account local sensitivity often inhibits planners from making use of the

strategies of others who are conducting similar efforts. The result is the proliferation of a wide variety of home-grown, setting-specific programs.

Do programs have an impact on students? To some extent, the question is premature, since sex education is currently so variable. Nevertheless, research into this question has been undertaken, and, in reviews of this literature (e.g., Kirby, 1985; Hofferth, 1987), generally limited effects of sex education on students are noted. Kirby (1985), for example, in his review reports that sex education programs can increase knowledge, but have little impact on values, particularly regarding one's own behavior. Past studies indicate that programs do not affect the incidence of sexual activity, and are inconclusive regarding the impact of programs on birth control and pregnancy rates (Kirby, 1985).

In evaluating these findings, it is important to remember that at this time, sex education is for many, spotty at best. Under these conditions, limited impact is not surprising, and should not be taken as representative of the upper limit of program effectiveness. These generalizations provide no information about the potential effectiveness of more widespread and comprehensive sex education, and in general, are not very illuminating.

Of further interest is the extent to which the transmission of sex stereotypes may be a feature of sex education programs or specific sex education courses. Sex equity advocates (e.g., Klein, 1985) have long had the goal of reducing sex discrimination and sex stereotyping within education, but, as noted in a forthcoming special issue of the Peabody Journal of Education (Klein, in press), relatively little attention has been given to an application of sex equity concerns to sex education by either sex equity experts or sex education experts. One reason why this may be the case is that

while classroom teachers are generally familiar with the concepts of sex stereotypes and associated sex discrimination, they are less familiar with sex equity as a tangible educational outcome, and are thus disadvantaged when it comes to making an application of sex equity concerns within their work, whether it be sex or math education.

Since the realization of sex equitable sex education depends in large part on how practitioners relate to the topic, an exploration of their reactions is warranted, and will be the focus of this paper. Included will be a discussion of several constraints that can prohibit practitioners from engaging in this topic, suggestions regarding strategies for attracting their increased attention to these concerns, and a description of one researcher's experience as an advocate of sex equitable menstrual education.

What Do Practitioners Think About Sex Equitable Sex Education?

Some advocates of sex equity (e.g., Whatley, in press) assert that sex equity, that is, the absence of sex stereotyping and undesirable discrimination based on sex differences, is an issue to be considered at every stage of program development. They argue that sex education that simply reinforces double standards of sexual behavior and restrictive sex role stereotypes may be worse than none at all. While this is, indeed, an assertion endorsed by many, practitioners responsible for designing and implementing sex education programs in schools do not readily acknowledge and agree with this position. As Whatley herself has acknowledged, when practitioners are asked to focus on sex equity issues as they relate to sex education, they often appear to be confused or disinterested in the topic, or, as Whatley says, report never having thought about sex equity concerns in

relation to sex education before; some are even resistant or hostile to such an application.

To some extent, these reactions derive from problems associated with the general process of curriculum change and changes in classroom practice. Too often, changes in the curriculum and in classroom practice are suggested to teachers by people who are several steps removed from actual classroom practice, such as administrators, consultants, curriculum developers, staff developers, or researchers, who often fail to learn about or recognize the concerns of teachers (cf. Evans, Stubbs, Frechette, Neely & Warner, 1987). One consequence of this way of working is that suggestions from non-practitioners are often perceived by practitioners as inappropriate, and many times, are ignored. The lack of fit perceived by practitioners can even breed hostility, particularly when even well-intended suggestions from outsiders become mandates from the administration. These are viewed as impositions by practitioners, who see their own concerns as devalued. Thus, well-intended sex-equity advocates who raise questions about sex equitable sex education within a school system in which they are not practitioners may get a luke-warm reception, simply because practitioners are not accustomed to finding advice from outside experts that is directly applicable to their work.

Moreover, the broader concept of sex equity is a slippery one, particularly to those whose day to day work is more practical than theoretical, more concrete than abstract. In contrast to practitioners, sex equity advocates and theorists have a wide understanding of sex equity goals; these scholars have reworked the definitions of these terms for themselves over and over again, are not hesitant to apply sex equity goals to specific aspects of education or to the culture at large.

This is not to say that practitioners are either simply uninterested in sex equity issues, or unable to apply general sex equity goals within a specific content area. Rather, sex equity issues are elusive to practitioners in comparison to other aspects of their work which they see as calling for their more immediate attention. Since the constraints presented by sex education work can serve to distance practitioners from including sex equity concerns among those they describe as primary, a consideration of them is in order as a first step in realizing the goal of sex equitable sex education.

Constraints

In sharp contrast to the lack of readiness on the part of practitioners to address sex equity concerns per se within the context of sex education is the relative ease with which they are able to identify a host of other, more practical concerns as constraints within their work.

Constraint #1: The need to enlist community support.

A first concern raised by many teachers involved in sex education work is the need to enlist community support for the programs they design. Practitioners are well aware of the fact that lack of community support can block implementation of even the best program. Most regard enlisting or maintaining community support as a basic task among the many that confront them within sex education work. Nevertheless, teachers often underestimate the time and effort required by this task, and, in attending to it, can come to resent working with the community. Teachers often feel so pressed by obligations to interact with the community that they regard this task as diverting them from attending to direct service tasks, such as developing curricula or refining instructional techniques. In such an atmosphere, practitioners have even less attention to give to a consideration of aspects

of sex education that they have not previously identified or articulated, such as sex equity.

Added stress for teachers accompanies the particular kind of interaction with community members that takes place while a program is being developed, and can further reduce the likelihood that practitioners will broaden the scope of their thinking about sex education to include less familiar aspects, like sex equity issues. Curriculum development in other areas is not usually subjected to scrutiny from people who are not educators. In contrast, in sex education work, it often seems to practitioners that members of the community want to be reassured before the fact that school personnel have chosen the "right" goals, the "right" materials, and the "right' method of imparting information to students, in short, that a proposed program will work. Teachers often feel required to project confidence in order to win confidence even though they may not feel entirely confident. As professionals, teachers know that this kind of confidence is not forthcoming until after a program's actual use with students, and they are uncomfortable when they are pressed to provide what they consider to be premature predictions about program effectiveness.

Constraint #2: Practitioners' Lack of Expertise in Sex Education.

Within the context of winning the community's support, many teachers feel the need to project confidence about their own capability as instructors of sex education in addition to the need to promote proposed programs. This is difficult for them to do, since many feel they have little professional expertise in the area of human sexuality. Most teachers did not study human sexuality in liberal arts or teacher training courses, nor is there ready access to current research on the topic within the school setting. Instead,

for most teachers, knowledge of human sexuality is largely a matter of personal history. This personal history, probably based on traditional male views of sexuality, is not likely to inspire thinking about sex equitable sex education goals.

In addition, limited personal history can present real problems for some teachers in the education of opposite sex students. Believing oneself to be more knowledgeable with respect to same-sex development, a teacher might feel less confident about answering questions about the experiences of members of the opposite sex, or even that it is inappropriate to do so. And, even though a teacher feels more informed about same sex development, s/he may still feel uncomfortable talking about same sex development with students of the opposite sex. A female teacher, for instance, who feels informed about menstruation, may nevertheless be uncomfortable discussing menstruation with boys. She will, in turn, be disadvantaged in eliciting boys' concerns about this topic and perhaps other aspects of girls' development. A male teacher may feel similarly inhibited in discussing nocturnal emissions with girls, and in eliciting their concerns about this and/or other aspects of boys' development.

When lack of confidence inhibits teachers in discussions with students, sex inequitable sex education instruction is likely to result. Students whose access to information, whether about same-sex or opposite sex development, is curtailed, and whose concerns are neither adequately elicited nor addressed, are more likely to adhere to the wide range of beliefs, often based on misinformation, and sex-biased expectancies that students have acquired from informal sex education.

Finally, teachers who do not consider themselves to be experts in the field of human sexuality are disadvantaged in evaluating commercially

available sex education materials. Believing that they are not knowledgeable enough to judge, they are unlikely to engage in sustained critique of content, and therefore, may unknowingly endorse the use of sex inequitable materials.

Constraint #3: The Community is Simultaneously Prescriptive and Vague.

Personal privacy and religious views place more constraints on sex education than on most other fields. As a result, community views often dictate the parameters of a given program. Unfortunately, topics which more obviously lend themselves to an application of sex equity concerns, such as female sexual pleasure, or common standards of sexual behavior and responsibility, are those often deemphasized in or excluded from sex education programs. In addition, the use of more inclusive programs developed by private agencies such as Planned Parenthood, The Girls' Club, or The Unitarian Universalists, is often discouraged, because local endorsement for a particular agency is offensive to one segment of the community. Consequently, some of the best material fails to find its way into the schools.

At the same time that they articulate broad guidelines as directives, school committees may be vague about many aspects of implementation. Classroom teachers are often left to decide for themselves how to implement specific charges and whether or not their curriculum decisions are in accordance with general directives. If sex equity concerns are not articulated in general directives, an application of these concerns within particular sex education lessons depends on the perspective of the individual instructor, whose concern about infusing sex equity in the sex education curriculum is, at best, secondary to a host of other concerns.

Constraint #4: Logistical Problems, Including the Optional Participation of Students.

Some key aspects of the delivery of sex education are determined by features of school organization, including staff resources and daily schedule. Practical realities more often than not dictate method of presentation. Whether or not students will receive sex education instruction from male and female teachers, for instance, may be determined simply by the number of male and female teachers available for such instruction within a particular setting. Because the majority of teachers in elementary schools are female, male teachers at this level are not as likely as females to be providers of sex education instruction.

Similarly, whether or not student groupings will be sex-segregated or same-sex may depend not only on the number of staff available to accommodate both kinds of groupings, but also on the number of students who actually participate in a program. Parents in many communities have the opportunity to exclude their children from sex education or opportunities such as health clinics. Within an optional program, teachers must plan not only for those enrolled in sex education programs, but also for children whose parents exclude them from sex education instruction. Many times in this situation, teachers who would like to offer opportunities for students to meet in both same-sex and sex-segregated groups, or who would prefer to offer male/female team teaching may not have the options to do so, depending on the number of available staff needed to cover both sex education and non-sex education classes.

In addition, classroom-based concerns compete with sex equity issues for consideration in logistical decisions about staffing and student groupings.

Many teachers for instance, are concerned about the role of familiarity with students in enhancing sex education instruction. They may have decided that classroom teachers who are most familiar with students, in comparison to specialist teachers, should teach sex educations lessons if possible. This preference, like preferences for sex equitable student groupings and staffing patterns, is contingent on the number of students in each classroom receiving permission to participate, and the number of staff available. In the context of limited resources, familiarity with students may be seen as more important to the overall success of the program than arrangements to provide opportunities for students to learn from both male and female, but possibly unfamiliar, teachers.

Finally, teachers in systems which offer optional programs are concerned about the impact of optional participation on students' interactions with each other. At the elementary level and junior high school levels in particular, many teachers wonder at the outset how to introduce an optional sex education curriculum unit to children. They wonder how to explain to children that there are going to be special classes about a topic that parents might feel children shouldn't learn about at school. They wonder, too, about how to handle questions from children about who receives permissions, and about what to do if, as teachers anticipate, children tease one another about being able or not being able to participate. Teachers are also concerned about the curiosity of those not attending the special classes. Will those enrolled in sex education classes need to be told not to talk to non-participants or show them work associated with the topic? If such a warning is issued, how will teachers make sure students heed the advice, and, what should be done if they don't? The draw on practitioners' attention from classroom-based concerns is

compelling, particularly when organizational features in a particular setting rule out sex equitable solutions to many logistical problems.

Strategies for Surmounting Constraints

The impact of these constraints on practitioners, indeed even their relative importance, will vary from setting to setting, and in relation to particular subtopics of sex education. Consequently, strategies for surmounting these constraints are not likely to be directly applicable in all cases. Nevertheless, the following strategies do address the concerns encompassed in the constraints described above, and provide an example of some concrete steps that might be taken to reduce their impact.

Strategy #1: Enlisting and Maintaining Community Support

In order to manage the task of enlisting and maintaining community support in a more satisfactory way, practitioners need to recognize the enormity of the task and plan accordingly. Provisions must be made for undertaking this task on a number of different levels. At the system level, certain practitioners could bear more responsibility than others for communicating with community people, whether to learn about the community's goals or to share the perspectives and plans of their colleagues. Others could take more responsibility for curriculum design and evaluation or other aspects of direct instruction. This delegation of responsibility would help to alleviate the pressure that practitioners feel to have to attend to all aspects of implementation simultaneously.

In addition, the opportunity for some practitioners to focus more exclusively on maintaining an ongoing dialogue with community members is likely to result in more, and more accurate, information for practitioners from the community about its views on particular aspects of sex education.

Moreover, developing an ongoing method of assessing community views will stand practitioners in good stead in their ongoing efforts to design and revise programs which take the community's views into account. In addition, with a more focused approach to community interaction, practitioners will be able to be more effective in their efforts to educate the adult community about particular aspects of both sex education and sex equity.

There is also a need at the individual level for each teacher to devise a strategy for talking with parents about sex education instruction since, at the very least, every teacher must communicate with parents about programs which take part in the classroom. Teachers will be more comfortable in talking about sex education instruction with parents within the context of ample opportunities within a particular school or school system for talking about concerns related to being sex educators. The atmosphere for these discussions should be one in which projecting confidence outward to the community is no more important than building confidence from within on the part of individual staff members.

Strategy #2: Practitioners' Lack of Expertise in Sex Education.

One obvious strategy for addressing teachers' lack of expertise with respect to both sex education and sex equity is for teacher training programs and school systems to offer sex equitable sex education courses. For reasons mentioned above, these courses should address teachers' own teaching and sexuality concerns in addition to providing information about sexuality.

In addition, a resource library within the school setting would afford practitioners the opportunity to peruse not only a selection of commercially available materials, even though some of these may not be materials that the school system ultimately adopts, but also current research on the topic of

human sexuality. Such a library might also include information about and from agencies such as SEICUS or Network Publications,[1] which are national sources of information about curriculum materials and research relating to sex education. Finally, the library might include lists of local sexuality researchers and sex education curriculum leaders in nearby universities and school systems. Ready access to such resources will provide tangible assistance to teachers who are developing specific lesson plans.

Researchers and other scholars in the field of sexuality can also help to reduce practitioners' lack of expertise. They can, for instance, make a significant contribution by writing research reports and other articles specifically for practitioners. Such reports, unlike current articles in academic journals which are targeted for specialized audiences, would demystify the terminology of experimental methodologies and instead, would include detailed descriptions of classroom or school settings in extended discussions of possible applications. Clear accounts of new findings would of enormous help to practitioners making decisions about the actual use of curriculum materials.

Strategy #3: The Community is Simultaneously Prescriptive and Vague

To a certain extent, the strategies for enlisting and maintaining community support just described also address the dilemma of the community as simultaneously prescriptive and vague. As mentioned, opportunities in which practitioners can regularly assess community views are also opportunities in which practitioners can educate the community about sexuality and sex equity.

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[1]SIECUS, The Sex Information and Education Council of the U.S., is located at New York University, 32 Washington Place, New York, NY 10003. Network Publications is a division of ETR (Education, Training, Research) and is located in Santa Cruz, CA 95061-1830, P.O. Box 1830.

In these exchanges, practitioners can try to encourage the community to implement sex equitable curricula, and they can also try to make sure that the prescriptive aspects of programs are sex equitable.

Strategy #4: Logistical Problems

Logistical problems are among the most difficult to solve. Nevertheless, in planning for curriculum change, it might be inspiring for practitioners to make use of the brainstorming strategy which encourages a free flow of ideas without attention to constraints. This strategy allows for the recognition of worthy goals, like the goal of sex equitable sex education, even though specific steps toward these goals may not be immediately attainable in a given situation. In contrast, when practical realities dictate the parameters of a discussion, worthy but as yet unattainable goals are often prematurely dismissed as inappropriate. Moreover, when practical realities change, realization of a specific goal is more likely, simply because it has been previously articulated.

Finally, it is important that practitioners find not only moral but also concrete support for their efforts to address classroom-based concerns. Those who are eager to have practitioners consider additional aspects of the task at hand should be ready to help them clear their already crowded agenda.

A Specific Example:

Advancing the Notion of Sex Equitable Menstrual Education

At the broadest level, it seems obvious that no strategy for attracting increased attention from practitioners to sex equity issues within sex education is likely to be effective unless it includes the recognition of practitioners' current concerns about sex education work. A specific example from my own work as an advocate of sex equitable menstrual education may shed

further light on the importance taking practitioners' concerns into account within the process of implementing strategies described above.

I am currently analyzing information from young girls about their thoughts, feelings and reactions to menstruation, as part of a long term research project on early adolescent girls' development. The project is headed by Jill Rierdan and Elissa Koff and housed at Wellesley College's Center for Research on Women. Information about girls' reactions to menstruation is directly relevant to the design of curriculum units regarding pubertal change for late elementary and junior high school students, and, sex equity concerns relating to menstrual education are numerous. Nevertheless, most practitioners with whom I' ve worked do not readily identify sex equitable menstrual education as an important topic within health/life/sex education curricula.

We think that much of what we've learned from our study would be of interest to both the parents and educators of early adolescent girls. For instance, there are several indications from our work that early adolescent girls are not nonchalant about menstruation, in spite of the ease with which girls and women manage menstruation as portrayed in media advertisements. One measure of girls' discomfort may be found in the number of responses they offer to specific questions about menstruation. When we ask girls to tell us what causes menstruation, for instance, far fewer of them answer these kinds of questions than other questions included in the survey, and many write in hostile remarks such as "none of your business" or "not saying" instead of simply selecting "don't know" as a choice.

Those who are willing to respond to questions about menstruation are either not well informed or inarticulate. They are, for instance, either

unable or unwilling to describe what causes menstruation. We interpret their lack either or actual or articulated knowledge about menstruation as further indications of their discomfort with it. Some of the longitudinal data that we have on this topic indicates that girls do, at some point, receive some instruction regarding menstruation, but the effectiveness of the instruction is questionable, as the following example reveals. Asked to respond to the question, "What causes menstruation" on four different occasions, one girl replied at the Time 1, "Don't know;" at Time 2, "Don't know;" at Time 3, "the endometrium sloughs off;" and finally at time 4, "Beats me." These responses indicate that whatever learning took place between Times 2 and 3 apparently did not take hold.

In small group discussions I've led, girls are more specific about their discomfort and their lack of information. Girls are painfully clear about how embarrassed they are about asking for information about menstruation. Many don't know how to bring up the topic with their mothers and/or with other trusted adults. Many are worried about mothers discussing their concerns with fathers, and most want to keep their menstruation secret from brothers as well as fathers.

Premenarcheal girls are preoccupied with wanting to know exactly how to predict when the first period will occur and with being prepared for it. Unfortunately, many are unable to make concrete plans for obtaining the necessary supplies to use either for practice or for the real event. In talking with girls about how to get supplies, I learned that many are nervous about carrying supplies with them in their purses because they are afraid that others, especially boys, will notice them. I also learned that many elementary and middle schools do not have machines available for dispensing

menstrual products. Girls learn, sometimes only through the grapevine, that if they need supplies they will need to ask the school nurse or secretary. Many are uncomfortable about having to reveal such a personal circumstance to someone who may be at best, a relative stranger or at worst, unfriendly.

Other girls are concerned about being permitted to leave class in order to attend to menstruation. They wonder in particular what to say to a male teacher who isn't inclined to take their request to leave class seriously.

And finally, girls are greatly concerned about what the boys think and know about menstruation. Many girls mention being afraid they'll be teased about menstruation by boys and that their friendships with boys will have to change when they get their periods.

At least two practical questions emerges from this information. First, how can schools act to reduce the discomfort young girls feel about menstruation, and second, where might a consideration of sex equity concerns related to menstrual education aid in that process? Our research group has made a number of suggestions for improving menstrual education in the schools (Stubbs, Rierdan & Koff, 1988) Most important, we feel, is our recommendation for a continuous program of menstrual education as opposed to the more typical single session lecture. Such a program is especially important for girls, because girls mature at different rates and because their concerns about menstruation vary throughout early adolescence. The early maturer is not likely to benefit from a lecture on menstruation that comes long after the fact of her menstruation. Similarly, the late maturer's concerns will not be addressed by a lecture that occurs well before her experience of being out-of-phase in terms of physical development with her peers. In addition to addressing girls' concerns more immediately and specifically, teachers who

revisit the topic at regular intervals throughout late elementary and junior high school should be able to help girls understand the developmental context in which menstruation occurs, thereby strengthening their notions about the normality of the process.

We further recommend, and this is a sex equity suggestion, that a comprehensive menstrual education include boys. Boys' information about girls' development is virtually non-existent, largely because telling boys about its various aspects, and about menstruation in particular, is still considered an afterthought by parents as well as by school people. My life span study of males' and females' attitudes towards menstruation, which includes data from males and females ranging in age from 11 to 65 years, indicates that of all age and gender groups in the study, the youngest boys had the most negative attitudes of all (Stubbs, 1984). These results complement previous research indicating that men believe menstruation is more debilitating for women than women think it is (Brooks-Gunn & Ruble, 1980; Parlee, 1974). The evidence suggests that in the absence of information, males nevertheless form opinions about this aspect of girls' and women's lives, opinions which may be erroneous.

Comments from the males in my study help shed light on their thinking about menstruation. The younger boys described their reactions to menstruation as including embarrassment, being "grossed out" and disgusted. A few mentioned that menstruation might be painful because of the blood. One older adolescent explained his early reactions: "I was initially shocked about it, then I was disgusted by it. Then sorrowful for women, The disgust was a reaction to the 'dirtiness' of menstruation and the sorrow was from the fact that it was painful and uncomfortable." Many older adolescent males commented

on the inadequacy of formal menstrual education and said that only within a close relationship with a girlfriend did they begin to develop any "real" understanding of what menstruation was all about.

Boys shouldn't have to wait until late adolescence to have their concerns about menstruation addressed, and they do have concerns. One ten-year-old boy who was trying to understand how to respond to girls who were having their periods asked, for instance, "Well, they say you're supposed to be nice to them, but how can you tell when they're having it?" Boys could have access to more information about girls' and women's lives. A more thorough menstrual education for boys would broaden their understanding of what female peers are experiencing and provide a more balanced view for them of this aspect of female development.

In addition, the availability of a more inclusive and comprehensive program of menstrual education within the school setting is likely to increase girls' level of comfort about menstruation in school. Girls want boys to know more about menstruation (Havens & Swenson, 1986) and are curious about what boys and men think about menstruation, even though many also say that they would not want friends who are boys, brothers, fathers, or other males to know about their menstruation. As one ninth grader with experience in talking to her father about menstruation explained in response to one of our questions, "It was helpful to hear from my father about girls and women he'd known who'd had 'accidents,' and how it wasn't life or death."

Accordingly, one goal within a more comprehensive menstrual education should be the inclusion of opportunities for coeducational discussions on the topic. The benefits of coeducational classes and discussions of these topics are eloquently articulated by Cooperman and Rhoades (1983) in a sex education

curriculum they wrote for Planned Parenthood. Among their most compelling points are the following:

> Maintaining a sex-segregated structure limits the potential for expanding for expanding children's knowledge of the opposite sex. Coed classes help facilitate an understanding that there are common interests, emotions, and experiences common to both sexes. By exploring these similarities, the misunderstandings between boys and girls might be lessened. The inherent differences that exist between the sexes should be discussed in coed groups so that an appreciation of these differences can occur. Students can be made aware of the unique strengths and capabilities of their own sex. (p. 4)

With these benefits in mind, educators may be more likely to persist in creating these opportunities for students, in spite of the almost certain resistance they are likely to encounter from both sexes who are currently inexperienced in such discussions and have no reason to think of them as helpful.

There are a number of other sex equity questions that relate to menstrual education. One wonders, for instance, about the implications of the ten-year-old boy learning that he should be nice to girls when they had their periods. Does another hidden message accompany this proscription, perhaps the notion that girls and women need special attention because they are a little bit "off" during their periods? Is this a message we intend for boys - and girls - to receive? And what about cramps? If a girl complains of cramps, is she automatically excused from whatever, no questions asked? Is this the kind of special treatment girls need during their periods, or might such a policy do a disservice to those who are using their menstruation as an excuse?

As I mentioned, most practitioners with whom I've shared my thoughts do not see an improved menstrual education as a top priority within their programs. And so, I look for bridges, bridges to connect my concerns with the important concerns of the practitioners with whom I work. I include focusing on practitioners' concerns along with imparting information. In discussing the notion of providing machines for dispensing menstrual products in one particular school, for instance, I was confronted by a principal who admitted that one reason machines had not been provided was because school people were afraid the girls would vandalize the toilets by stuffing down supplies either on purpose or inadvertently.

A number of possible responses to this disclosure came to mind. My initial reaction was to say that such a policy was ridiculous. It didn't make sense to penalize all girls in order to deter the anticipated actions of a small group. Nor did it seem likely to me that girls would spend their own money to buy enough pads to stuff the toilets even if they did harbor hostility for the school. Had I blurted out my first reactions, I would probably have insulted the principal by belittling his concerns. Indeed, his concerns about vandalism and the subsequent reactions of the custodians had not and would not have occurred to me as obstacles that stood in the way of my priority - facilitating teachers' thinking about how girls experience menstruating in the school setting.

As I pondered his remark, and focused on the principal's expressed concern, another response took form. I knew that the school had a pubertal education course of sorts for students. I mentioned that I thought that, in the context of such classes, school people might think about devoting a session or two to talking with girls about the machines and how to use them

and how to dispose of pads and tampons properly. I mentioned that information about how to dispose of menstrual products was not well highlighted in menstrual education materials and would be useful for students in general. I added that the opportunity to talk about proper disposal should decrease the probability that girls would cause plumbing problems. This response provided a bridge. In acknowledging and addressing at least one aspect of the principal's concern, a precedent for working together, not at cross purposes, was established. The way had been cleared for moving on to identify other kinds of improvements in menstrual education that might be applicable within the setting this particular school provided.

Similarly, in another setting, I might find very little general enthusiasm for developing a comprehensive menstrual education program for boys. But, if I hear anyone admit that s/he'd like to see boys receive more instruction on the topic, I try to find out more about what is currently being taught to boys and, if possible, about the concerns teachers have about talking to boys about menstruation. With this more specific information, I can make better decisions about which of my ideas are more likely to be of interest and of potential use within a particular setting.

Both my current work with practitioners, and my former experience as a practitioner with considerable experience in developing sex education curricula, lead me to conclude that practitioners can and will more readily turn their attention to a consideration of a variety of other aspects of their work if their primary concerns about the work are acknowledged, or better yet, even addressed on some level, as suggested in Strategy #4. Thus the probability of a fuller consideration of sex equitable sex education by practitioners will be increased by the respectful articulation of what <u>can</u> be

done in light of what is being done. Among those interested in realizing the goal of sex equitable sex education , practitioners who seize the topic as their own will be in the best position, not only to promote it, but also to deliver it to students.

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